

**COMMUNITY, CONFIDENCE, AND  
COMPETENCE:  
EMPLOYABILITY ESSENTIALS  
THROUGH THE LEADERSHIP AND EXCELLENCE BY  
TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS (LET US) ACADEMY**



**CASE STUDY**

Excellence with Integrity Institute & The Ray Center at Drake University

2019



This paper presents an exploratory case study of the *Excellence with Integrity Employability Essentials* curriculum and facilitator training, as implemented in a two-year pilot at Tuskegee University. Following best practice, the case study is “organized with readers in mind” (Stake, 1995, p. 22). It begins with background on the call and context of the LET US Academy. It then lays out the structure and content of the Excellence with Integrity Curriculum and Training. This is followed by a discussion of the exploratory case study methodology. The results are presented as emerging themes summarizing the evidence of impact and implementation insights drawn from a series of purposeful site-based interviews and focus groups. The case study concludes by raising questions and considerations for replicating the approach and applying more rigorous program evaluation.

## LET US ACADEMY

Tuskegee University launched the Leadership and Excellence by Tuskegee University Students (LET US) Academy (hereafter “the Academy”) in the Fall of 2017. The formation of the Academy represents in part a general and ongoing call to fulfill the historic mission of Tuskegee University, which states:

*The University’s programs focus on nurturing the development of high-order intellectual and moral qualities among students and stress the connection between education and the highly trained leadership Americans need in general, especially for the work force of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond. The results we seek are students whose technical, scientific, and professional prowess has been not only rigorously honed, but also sensitively oriented in ways that produce public-spirited graduates who are both competent and morally committed to public service with integrity and excellence.*

The Academy also answers a more specific call to address the acute 21<sup>st</sup> century work force needs as evidenced by the increasing number of employers who express interest in intensive formation of “soft skills” (i.e., employability essentials) among individuals with backgrounds in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

Development of competencies that are at the core of excellence, integrity, and professionalism remains critical for economic vitality in the United States. For example, the report *Pathways to Prosperity* argues that “within the U.S. economy ... many adults lack the skills and work ethic needed for many jobs that pay a middle-class wage.” Summarizing data from several hundred employers, the report *Are They Really Ready to Work* concludes that “when basic knowledge and applied skills rankings are combined for each educational level, the top five ‘most important’ are always applied skills,” with work ethic and professionalism at the top of the list. When asked to rate the importance of work ethic and professionalism, about 80% of the employers indicated it was very important for high school graduates, 83% reported it was very important for two-year college and tech school graduates, and 94% said it was very important for four-year college graduates.

The Academy was designed with the goal of providing students with skills that enable them to share and sell ideas, function in teams, develop business acumen, create stakeholder buy-in and momentum, lead coworkers, and navigate increasingly complex global workforce settings. The Academy introduces new Tuskegee college students to a journey of

self-knowledge and interpersonal awareness. The Academy seeks to empower the realization of each person's unique potential through increased knowledge and targeted practice around essential employability and life-success skills, including: goal setting and goal achievement, communicating effectively with others, developing habits for excellence, building on strengths and purpose, managing priorities and stress. These qualities represent the hallmark character strengths of the most distinguished Tuskegee graduates and great leaders in every walk of life. After two years of bootstrapping between theoretical goals and practical insights, the strategic intent of the Academy has evolved and sharpened into the following short summary: *the Academy seeks to create an intentional culture dedicated to helping students acquire the ability to achieve excellence with integrity while at Tuskegee and in life thereafter.*

In 2016 Tuskegee engaged The Robert D. and Billie Ray Center at Drake University and the Excellence with Integrity Institute, two organizations with extensive experiences in the development and assessment of essential employability skills. The three organizations joined together and secured pilot grant funding from the DuPont Corporation to engage a sample of first-year Tuskegee students in an intensive effort to develop their skills and create a community of support needed for them to thrive while at Tuskegee, and in their future employment. Funding from the grant helped Tuskegee secure licensing and training on the *Excellence with Integrity™ Employability Essentials* curriculum, while also providing the resources to secure the personnel needed to lead the Academy and the implementation ef-

forts at Tuskegee. (Mr. Walter Cooper was the person hired to this position).

## EMPLOYABILITY ESSENTIALS CURRICULUM AND TRAINING OVERVIEW

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The *Excellence with Integrity™ Employability Essentials* target a set of essential skills demonstrated in the research to be vital for success in school, sport, work, and life. The series feature replicable teaching and learning strategies presented in the form of Excellence with Integrity™ (EWI) Tools. The research-based EWI Tools constitute the core of each module and act as replicable behavior guides and standards for learning continued beyond the initial introductory lesson experience. EWI Tools distill the relevant academic, experimental, and field research into a teaching strategy, process, checklist, or rubric addressing the gap in employability skills identified by employers. The *Employability Essentials* Facilitator Guides are designed to be practitioner-friendly, implementation-resilient resources that can be successfully utilized in a variety of settings and circumstances and easily adjusted to match diverse learning styles of students and expertise of facilitators. Customization of the implementation strategy is, in fact, an essential condition for making the resources work within particular environmental circumstances, learning goals, and a host of other factors.

Over 20 years of applied research, assessment and development work and through extensive cross-referencing of other existing frameworks, the Institute has identified the following competencies as essential for employability in the 21st century:

## 1 Work Ethic, Goal Achievement, Problem Solving, Innovation



### Committing to high standards and continuous improvement through work ethic and self-management

- Adhere to strong internal standards of excellence.
- Exhibit the positive attitude and persistent effort needed to continuously improve.
- Seek external support and incorporate feedback effectively.



### Committing to goal achievement

- Develop, pursue, monitor, and modify goal achievement action steps.



### Exhibiting critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation

- Maximize the potential of available resources.
- Consider different perspectives, approaches, and possibilities when solving problems.
- Leverage individual and collective strengths to overcome performance challenges.
- Utilize effective decision-making across diverse social and professional contexts and situations.

## 2 Communication, Collaboration, Negotiation, Teamwork



### Communicating and collaborating with efficiency and effectiveness

- Clarify and verify understanding.
- Express views and ideas effectively.
- Use effective communication strategies in diverse contexts, settings and situations.
- Recognize and respond to the feelings and perspectives of others.



### Developing teamwork through positive and productive relationships

- Adapt to new roles and changing strategy in pursuit of a team goal.
- Exercise flexibility and willingness to make necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal.
- Recognize and balance diverse beliefs and perspectives to reach effective solutions.
- Work efficiently and effectively with others.

# EXCELLENCE WITH INTEGRITY™ COMPETENCIES

## 4 Priority & Stress Management, Growth, Life Purpose



### Managing priorities and time

- Identify factors that contribute to (drivers) or detract from (preventers) effective time management.
- Organize, prioritize, plan and execute tasks effectively.



### Overcoming obstacles, focusing on growth, and reducing stress

- Implement productive strategies for reducing stress.
- Use failures, disappointments, and setbacks as opportunities to learn and improve.



### Living a purposeful, balanced and healthy life

- Pursue multidimensional life-goals, interests, and aspirations.
- Work to develop personal strengths and overcome personal challenges.
- Live a safe, balanced, and healthy life.

## 3 Integrity, Responsibility, Leadership, Service



### Demonstrating emotional intelligence, integrity, and responsibility

- Demonstrate ethical conscience and competence.
- Exhibit personal accountability for responsibilities and obligations.
- Act with integrity according to a well-formed ethical code of conduct.
- Hold self and others accountable.



### Leading and serving others

- Use one's talents and skills to serve the good of the group/team.
- Use interpersonal and group management skills to lead others effectively.
- Motivate and empower others.
- Commit to shared goals and the collective good.

These competencies cross-reference and align with both the 21st Century Skills framework, as

well as two of the essential capability platforms of the STEM2.0 framework.

The following Employability Essentials Table of Contents shows how the materials are organized into six main topics, with each broken into two to three learning modules. Each main topic also features an Optimal Performance™ self-study, a self-reflection tool for evaluating real-world implementation of the targeted skill.

delivered as one lesson, spread over several classes, or modified for delivery in any other way that would best fit the learning goals and implementation parameters. Matching *Employability Essentials Student Workbooks* include the learning activities that students engage in during the introductory experience in class, the

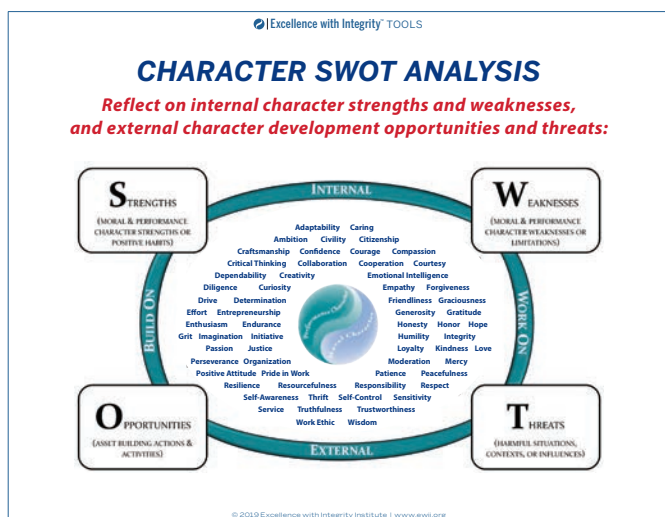
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The learning modules in the *Employability Essentials Facilitator Guides* provide introductory experience to a particular competency or learning target. The whole module can be

Excellence with Integrity™ Tools that students may continue using as they work on the extensions, and rubrics and space for reflection and planning. Thus, each learning module incorporates two main features: first, research-based

EWI Tool(s)—visual summary of the essential knowledge and/or replicable skill development process, and second, an experiential introduction to the tool(s)—guided practice.

For example, Module 4-1 focuses on developing strengths and purpose. The Excellence with Integrity™ Tool featured in the lesson is the Character SWOT Analysis.



In each module the learner is introduced to a strategy like the Character SWOT Analysis, and then has a chance to experience it through simulated activities. Over time mastery of each skill results from habits, mindset, and accountability provided through the customized program experience unique to each implementation plan and setting. The program modules are standardized, but each program experience is customized by facilitators to meet the goals, circumstances, and expertise of the setting in which it is being implemented. This is done through the training of trainers where facilitators collaborate identifying ways to maximize interest from and impact for the learners by integrating their individual expertise with the research-based master strategy referred to as “the Four KEYS.”

The 4 KEYS are four types of learning experiences needed for mastery of the skills. So, for example, the Character SWOT Tool is “opened up” (i.e., explained and made relevant) for the participants, when they engage in activities that allow them to self-reflect (Self-Study), to examine other positive examples and/or negative counter-examples (Other-Study), as well as to create their own Character SWOT (Performance/Simulation) and share it with others for feedback and encouragement (Support & Challenge). These 4 KEYS are “key” (i.e., essential) to creating transformational learning experiences.



Without these 4 Keys, used in strategic combinations, all that is learned is *knowledge about* the essential employability skills. Yet, what is needed for lasting impact is knowledge about skills combined with a very deliberate *experience of* these employability skills within a supportive community. For mastery of skills, educational experience must not end with simply conveying to students what the skills are and why they are important in their educational and employment journey. The educational experience must seek to provide impact through

head, heart, and hand — knowledge about, attraction to, and experience of the essential employability skills.

The second module in this unit (4-2) utilizes the EWI Elevator Speech Tool — a rubric or replicable guide for capturing and sharing one’s story, which can be used to pitch an idea or to pitch oneself. Selling yourself and your ideas is an essential employability skill. This module and its related research-based Tool draw upon the work of Heath and Heath (2007) and their book *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die*.

The Elevator Speech can produce a discrete outcome, such as a specific speech for a specific purpose, but it can also cultivate a replicable skill, the ability to efficiently and effectively pitch ideas—and oneself. Whether it is securing an internship, or getting buy-in for an idea once one has an internship, this module focuses on a skill essential for Tuskegee students’ success.

dents and instructors) become the shared way of behaving for the group, then the new group habits become part of the overall culture. In sum, competencies identify what students will be able to do, whereas the teaching and learning Tools provide a guide for development of habits of the head, heart, and hand—*how* students will put the knowledge in action. Following the introductory lesson or experience, extension activities suggest additional opportunities to practice the skill using the EWI lesson Tool(s) as guides for behavior. The extensions provided in the materials are just a small sample of the nearly unlimited opportunities for integration of skill development into different situations and contexts outside of and beyond the initial lesson.

## Initial Training and Planning of Implementation

In the summer of 2017 preceding the launch of the Academy, The Ray Center and the Excellence with Integrity Institute delivered an *Excellence with Integrity Employability Essentials* curriculum training to a select group of Tuskegee faculty and staff. The three-day training offered an immersion in the program materials along with in-depth discussions about plans for implementation at Tuskegee. Faculty and staff learned about the structure and substance of the modules and had opportunities to work with the Excellence with Integrity Tools to enhance their comfort levels with the materials and to generate insights into opportunities where particular skills are needed and where they could be effectively developed within the naturally occurring curriculum. In the training, faculty and staff spent time understanding the core competency in focus, the related research,

Excellence with Integrity TOOLS

### **ELEVATOR SPEECH ESSENTIALS**

***Harness your knowledge, experience, passion, and plans in a ‘sticky’ story that is:***

- » Concise
- » Credible
- » Relevant
- » Emotional
- » Memorable



Adapted from Heath & Heath (2007).

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The skills introduced in a module become stable habits when they are consistently and pervasively learned, practiced, refined, and reinforced. When the habits of individuals (stu-



and the relevant EWI Tool(s). Tuskegee faculty and staff spent time with The Ray Center and the Institute experts determining the optimal scope and sequence, timing, and implementation flow to maximize engagement and impact.

In the first year of implementation options for integration of the materials included either within an existing STEM course (such as the Orientation to Animal, Poultry and Veterinary Sciences, APSC 100, or General Chemistry I, CHEM 230) or through the stand-alone University Orientation course, OREN 100. The long-term goal was to follow up the completion of the module course work with experiential learning projects where the skills learned in the Academy would be applied in a real world setting like an internship, shadow, or actual experience.

## EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY DESIGN OVERVIEW

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The resources and design of this project provided for the purchase of the *Employability Essentials* materials along with the initial two-day training of Tuskegee staff. In addition, one-day planning meeting for Mr. Cooper, the program point at Tuskegee was provided at The Ray Center after the completion of the first year. However, the original pilot did not provide resources for, or carry the expectation of, a formal program evaluation. Near the close of the second year, follow-up conversations with the Academy program coordinator indicated a belief that in fact the intervention had made a distinctive contribution to the students involved, and that staff had developed some important insights about optimal conditions for effective implementation. Based on this belief the decision was made to conduct an exploratory case study (c.f., Yin, 2018) to examine the

evidence of impact and optimal implementation insights. The exploratory case study also sought to determine the viability of replicating the intervention and to gain insights for a more formal program evaluation in the future.

The case study methods included a series of on-site interviews and focus groups, which were conducted at Tuskegee University by a representative from The Ray Center and a representative from the Excellence with Integrity Institute. The interviews and focus groups took place over a two-day period in April, 2019. The sampling methodology was based on an intensity sampling logic where “one seeks excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 171). The data analysis followed a spiral methodology (Creswell and Poth, 2018) whereby “the process of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process—they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously” (p. 185).

Initial data analysis began during the site visit through iterative sense-making among the on-site research team members. This led to initial themes and categories, which were then explored in subsequent focus groups. This iterative process continued throughout the visit and resulted in an initial set of findings. Following the on-site collection and analysis, the recorded focus group and interview data were transcribed and analyzed further to identify emerging themes coalescing the evidence of impact along with insights regarding the optimal implementation experience. The preliminary data analysis and presentation was shared for feedback and member checks by key stakeholders at Tuskegee as well as other experts from The Ray Center and the Excellence with

Integrity Institute who were not involved in the on-site data collection.

As an exploratory case study of intrinsic value to the authors and the stakeholders in this project, there exist numerous opportunities for bias and blind spots. However, several steps have been taken to mitigate these threats, including the triangulation of data sources and the member checks as recommended in qualitative case study best practice. Data collection and sample selection methods limit generalizability of this case study. However, the primary goal of an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) is to determine what, if any, evidence of impact is identified by the participants along with their insights regarding optimal implementation. To substantiate generalizations of the results to other settings, the findings of this case study would need to be examined and retested using mixed-methods appropriate for program evaluation.

The section that follows presents some of the main impact and implementation themes that have emerged from the analysis. The quotes that appear in the text have been excerpted and edited from the full original transcript to best represent the authentic and predominant insights of the respondents, while also allowing for ease of reader consumption. Practically speaking, this means that certain parts of familiar speech typical of a focus group have been cleaned or condensed by combining sentences, removing 'uh,' 'um,' 'you know' and other similar types of speech, which are typical of the spoken word but can be distracting in the written word and do not seem to add value to the type of analysis being presented in this exploratory case study.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT THEMES

**Theme 1: The Academy shaped a close-knit community that was more like a family or team than a class.**

In the first year of the Academy the participants formed a tight-knit community around and through their experience. This was partly by design intent, and partly unanticipated. Seeking out 125 students around specific criteria was an intentional design decision. Giving those students a new and more intensive experience of a specific curriculum also was intentional. The degree to which these students would come to experience in-depth support and care for each other and from their mentors was a positive outcome whose intensity and significance was not entirely anticipated, but emerged as significant and promising outcome from the pilot. As one female student describes:

*So one thing that I really enjoyed about the Let Us Academy is the kind of family that we built with each other. This was our first year coming in as freshmen. So, we didn't really have a lot of connections with a lot of other students. And by being in the program, we were able to connect. And these [connections] were with students that came from many different diverse majors. I was able to bridge those gaps between my animal science major with other majors and see how we could collaborate and work together. That's one thing I really enjoyed about the program, letting me gain a lot of connections that I still have today.*

The connections that were established left an impact on the students. However, they were perceived as more than simple, surface-level connections. The connections were so impact-

ful that this student—and many others in the focus groups—described them as having a “family feel.” A second female student adds the following:

*Barriers were broken down in the beginning of the school year and the beginning of the program. It wasn't like some classes where it wasn't until November you actually got to know your neighbor's name. In the Let Us Academy by the second week, we were getting to know each other's faces, each other's names, each other's personalities. And that's what a family is. We get to know them on a more deeper and emotional context. And that's very important when you want to build a successful program and everybody who actually care about each other.*

The students consistently echoed the sentiments of this student in describing the impact of the experience in breaking down barriers. They contrast the “family” feel to that of other “classroom” experiences where you are in class with fellow students, but not necessarily psychologically safe and emotionally connected. How was this sense of intense community established? Drawing upon the insights gathered from the focus groups, it appears that the community was both needed for and developed from the content. A student explains:

*I think it was made like a family whenever we got together and whenever we had our meetings, things that we did. I remember, for instance, one time we were doing our [Excellence with Integrity] Elevator Speeches for each other and critiquing each other and this was our first experience together as freshmen. This is like our second week at school, so of course we're not that good at it, but just being able to let my guard down and sit in front of my other peers and have them be like giggling at some of the things I say. And being like, “No, actually that was really good what you just said.” That be-*

*came a family aspect. That's only stuff I do in front of my family, like letting my guard down as far as that happens. That's important because that's what made me want to come back to the program and tell my friends about it and to continue it. Because if I didn't feel like it was a part of a family, I wouldn't come back, it wouldn't be something I enjoyed. But that's one thing that made it be enjoyable.*

In this statement one can observe the safety and support that is needed for the content: presenting an elevator speech to people you don't know makes you vulnerable, both in terms of the content you share and in terms of your presentation skills. But having made themselves vulnerable one is bonded together with the others who also have done and experienced these same emotionally powerful things. As a result, a sense of closeness and trust is established that defies what one might think they could possibly experience so soon and in this kind of a setting. In essence, the sense of connectedness and community was the intermediate outcome, which in turn mediated development of “employability skills” (i.e., passion, persuasion, presentation, etc.).

Another student explains how the interactive activities—the “performance/simulation” element of the 4 KEYS—brought them together as a community:

*The interactive activities included in the modules were very useful for us to interact with the lesson and to interact with each other. One of the interactive activities was a flow chart, we would draw it on the board and we would fill it in, each section with our own takeaway and from it by mixing them together [we ended up with] in one big takeaway.*

Interacting with the lesson was an experiential opportunity whereby students were also required to interact with one another. As a result the sense of being known and knowing others takes on an added level of intimacy and connectedness. The program exists to develop the employability essentials. However, the answer to the students' more immediate question, *what's in it for me now?* appears to be: *the community support and expertise you need to survive and thrive.* They got to know themselves and their classmates, which made it feel intimate like a family. You hear this in the following student quote:

*Unlike class where it's mandatory to come, this program, we as students wanted to come. ... even though this wasn't a mandatory class, we wanted to come to meetings. We wanted to be there and be present and be heard and hear each other. And it's because of that positive atmosphere that Let Us Academy has given us that it has been successful and the students come back and participate and that's why it [the family atmosphere] continues. We continue that family atmosphere.*

Additional insights to the family atmosphere created in the Academy are explored by a male student in the following:

*The environment is very chilled. The vibe you get from a regular classroom, it's very formal. But when you come to Let Us Academy it's informal, but in a formal way. It's like we're comfortable. So it's a refreshing environment. It's orderly, but it's like "let's do what we came here to do and get it done."*

We begin to see the formula: it is a relaxed but orderly environment. There is work to be done, so it is not informal, but it feels "refreshing" to the students—not class-like or burdensome, too heavy or too formal. This relaxed environ-

ment doesn't undermine but actually supports a sense of community or responsibility for others that is typical of a strong team.

The participants describe the program coordinator, Mr. Cooper, as more like a coach—a life-coach—than a teacher. One female student described how "Mr. Cooper is definitely on his toes, always trying to find something better. Or something that will compliment Let Us Academy." A male student agreed that Mr. Cooper is "always trying to improve... always looking for ways to improve, either the interactivity or just the implementation in general." Another student described (with a smile on her face): "He was determined, sometimes it annoyed me. Like, 'Oh my God Mr. Cooper, I just want to go home'." She explained further saying,

*Mr. Cooper often talks about employability essentials how that's his main goal for us, getting us to fine-tune our soft skills for employability. He gives us also scenarios, like one time we did a skit on how it felt if we had an employee, well, a coworker that we didn't really get along with and how we would handle that. Just different small things like that helped me.*

Observing Mr. Cooper present the materials one can feel his passion for the content and the way that he presses hard on the importance of these essential skills. He presents like a coach, stalking the practice area with a passion that leaves no doubt that he cares about the content—and more importantly his students. Even when "the practices" get long and begin to test the students' patience, they feed off his love and commitment to them and to their success, which in turns seems to translate into their love and concern for one another. Several students explained the sense of responsibility for each other they came to feel. One student explained:

*If somebody wasn't there, it was like, "Hmm, I wonder where this person is." They might get a call or a text. We're like, "Let's text 'em; let's figure out where they are."*

In most classrooms students have a shared experience of sorts; but only rarely are they bound together by this deep sense of collective responsibility for one another. This is a type of connectedness more commonly seen in teams or other extra-curricular activities where students and coaches are bonded together by a common goal and experiences. One student explains it as follows:

*I think that's self-responsibility and collective responsibility was grown organically and taught in Let Us. On the organic side, us being freshmen, we just saw the importance of getting to know each other and getting to build that family atmosphere on a quicker basis because we were all new and finals were coming up. Through the lessons, as well, we learned more depth of the importance of self-responsibility and collective responsibility.*

Leadership and teamwork, personal and collective responsibility are indeed themes that are taught directly in the program. However, the "organic" sense of community emerged to an uncommon degree in these cohorts where they came to feel a sense of community with and responsibility for their fellow classmates.

## Theme 2: The Academy developed and enhanced confidence and competence among students.

*In what ways has curriculum and community impacted you?* In response to this question a second powerful theme that emerged from students is their belief that the experience developed, fortified, and even increased their

confidence. Again and again students returned to the theme of their growth in confidence. For some the confidence they gained built upon an existing confidence. One male student said:

*What I gained most through the program is confidence. Even though I do feel that I have certain skill sets, I didn't have the confidence to display them and I didn't have the confidence to display myself. So, Let Us Academy really helped me gain the confidence so that I can actually go out and put it on display.*

This student echoed a theme expressed by many students: I had some of these leadership and employability skills already, but the Academy experience helped to refine the skills and build the confidence to show them as go-to strengths of character. In fact, this student later expressed an insight shared by several students: the belief that their first impression was basically "I have heard all this before and I already do these, so what's this all about?". The student states:

*The first impression was like, [these are] lessons that we've already heard. It's like goal setting and goal achievement, priority, stress, you know we get drilled this in high school. Not saying it's a bad thing, because we all need it. But you're like, "Okay, I've got to do all these extra modules and work for these lessons that I hear all the time." I think it wasn't until the guest speaker came that it clicked with me and I was like, "Okay, this is something different ... Oh, oh this makes sense now."*

When asked about particular "aha moments" this student describes how his sense that "I know all this stuff" turned into a moment of deepening self-awareness and development. He explains:

*I remember that we listed all of our positive characteristics. Then, there was a list of all of the negative characteristics. That kind of helped me because you know, it's right there on the paper. So I see these are the skills that I'm good at, whether it's communication, writing, or math, or being sociable. So, it helps all of the positive stuff and it helps all the negative stuff too. [I saw that] I'm a little bit antisocial, I'm a little bit selfish, I get nervous. So it helps with all the negative as well. The third thing that we did [in this module] is we found ways to turn those negatives into positives.*

In this string of quotes we see a student expressing something quite natural and believable—an experience shared by many of the students. It begins with a heartfelt wondering, *Why am I doing this if I already have these skills and know this?* Then through the self-reflection activities and interactive sharing within the group the student comes to realize the depth and breadth of mastery that is still possible, which ultimately contributes to his emerging confidence.

This young man sees that he was in fact good at these skills before, but now he has confidence, a belief that he is really good at them as a result of this experience. In fact, he applies for and is accepted to a prestigious internship and he acknowledges that his confidence in applying was “not something I would have done normally, without the Let Us Academy.” Near the close of the focus group he also expresses the following:

*Being in this meeting [the focus group] really kind of shows my growth to myself because if this was a high school me, or this was high school entering college me, sitting in this chair? I would probably be shaking, my heart's beating fast, I'd get the nervous palms, sweaty palms.*

*So, to me being in this room, talking to you guys and being comfortable enough to share my opinions and give feedback about the program, shows my growth.*

We have observed in his comments the journey that many students described, one of an initial confidence that is both true and false. The confidence is true because these are in fact confident and competent young people at the start. But the confidence is false in that these young people are often hiding very real weaknesses and vulnerabilities that must be strengthened for them to be truly confident and competent in the long term. In the very process of this focus group, this young man reveals a core aspect of the program: they are here at Tuskegee because they are accomplished and confident, but the Academy experience challenges them to go deeper into themselves and be willing to make themselves vulnerable by acknowledging and addressing both their strengths and weaknesses. Sharing these reflections about oneself is an act of courage, but one that instills the confidence needed to succeed at Tuskegee and beyond.

Many students expressed similar perceptions regarding the impact of the experience in helping to refine and strengthen their skills. One female student said the following:

*I was pretty confident with myself before I came to Tuskegee, but coming to university staggered me a bit because it was a new environment for me, it was something I didn't know. I was away from my family—far away—it was a lot going on. But, by being in the Let Us Academy—especially since it started so soon [in the freshman year]—by being in it, I was able to learn what having confidence in yourself allows you to do.*

The confidence for this student was a matter of recovering it, after feeling a bit rattled by the distance from home and the new university environment. The Academy bolstered her confidence and reminded her of the power within herself and her cohort. Another female student spoke about how it helped her, even though she was a member of the ROTC program, which clearly recruits for leadership and character skills as a prerequisite. She says:

*As college students, and future leaders and even me being in the army ROTC program, we're not really trained on building the soft skills. We're trained on building the bigger skills but not really focusing on the smaller things that together build the bigger picture. I really love this program and how it brought the focus of that, which to some other people might be seen as minute or not that important, but some skills actually have helped me a lot in getting my internships over this past summer.*

Many others spoke to the ways in which the experience increased their confidence. One young woman said, "I definitely feel like it enhanced my confidence and my employability skills." She, like many of the other students interviewed, connected this confidence directly to her competence in landing an internship. She said: "Let Us Academy definitely fine-tuned my skills. I definitely feel like that is probably why I did get accepted into the two-year internship that I'm at now." This was a common feeling amongst students interviewed: confidence lead to competence, or being able to assume a leadership position as a class officer, secure prestigious internships, network with alums, or job shadow in their field of study.

The point here is not an assertion that "the program caused these outcomes." The point here

is that *in their minds*, students attribute their enhanced confidence (a belief that they can succeed) to the Academy experience, which they believe has led to their achievement of some very specific accomplishments. In this way they believe the Academy has lead them to acquire demonstrated competence that is valued by others at Tuskegee and in the real world. They consistently and specifically describe growth in their individual and collective confidence and connect it to very tangible and desirable outcomes. In this regard one could assert that they perceive that the program isn't simply nice, helpful, and good in a general or generic way; rather, they see it as instrumentally valuable. In this way one could assert that it is both nice and necessary. This is an important emerging finding since if students did not view the development of "employability skills" as having some tangible short-term payoff, then the long-term payoff might likely not be worth the short-term opportunity costs in their minds. This was supported by a computer science professor who was part of the training and implementation. She said:

*I do feel they're [the Academy students] settling down a little sooner. As freshmen, a lot of times they come in eager, running around, or they're just shell-shocked. So that transition where they get to that happy medium for these students overall—I won't say everyone, but overall—they reached that sooner. That maturity level, that transition from being away from mom, dad, and someone telling you, "Do this. Do that." To being able to make decisions and think about the decisions they make and whether or not they're right or wrong.*

This veteran professor believes the Academy students gain confidence and maturity more quickly than the average students she typically

sees. The same professor used an example of how an Academy student demonstrated maturity and confidence through a difficult decision to change majors. She described:

*We hate to say it but in computer science there is some turn-over. We did have some persons who were in the program initially, but they did change their major. But it's how this person did it. Most times, you just find out next year, when they didn't enroll in the computer science class. But this student had that confidence to say, "Professor, I really learned a lot in class, but it's just not what I see myself doing." That was just now sending chills down my arms. Even though you hate to see them change their major, you just really...it's a nice way to do it.*

Turn-over happens, but in and through the experience this veteran professor senses something very different from the Academy student—so much so that it “sends chills down her arms.” She explained further what she observed:

*Putting on my academic advisor hat, one of the key things I see is they're still, I won't say, foolish but they're still finding themselves those first two semesters. And this program I think helps them, gives them some direction. They still may be searching. But it gives them some focus, some way to find what actually works, what doesn't, and not just floundering or depending on other people to make their decisions. The program gives you tools on how to reflect on, What are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? What do I see as my goals? So they have some ways to make those decisions rather than just running around, asking their friends and really having some directed thought in the decisions that they make.*

This veteran educator and academic advisor realizes that the Academy experience is not a panacea. She acknowledges that students may

still struggle to find balance, or manage their time well; they might even change majors. But she can sense the confidence and maturity of the students and in particular values that they are not simply boats without an anchor or motor. They are nested in a community that supports and challenges them and gives them tools to ensure the growth of their confidence and competence.

The confidence and competence gained from the program experience is particularly important given that Tuskegee is a member of the historically black colleges and universities, serving primarily minority students many of whom are experiencing a pathway that may not have been shared by their parents. One female student gave voice to this when she said:

*Before Let Us Academy, being at an HBCU, they stress and they emphasize networking, seeing as African Americans we're under-represented in a lot of career fields. So, ever since freshman year, I realized this... that symposiums we went into Auburn or just any event where we saw companies, they were pushing us, "Guys, just assert yourself a little bit more. Talk to people." Let Us Academy just complimented that. It added on to knowing that you ... so, you may feel a little hesitant, but we're going to give you the skills to not feel as nervous.*

In this quote we see this student expressing in part how the Academy helped to instill confidence around an HBCU expectation: Tuskegee University stresses networking as a critical success strategy. For these students, the Academy helped provide additional skills and confidence as a networker (a sentiment expressed by many students in the focus groups). They seem to have understood from the outset why networking was so important. The Acad-



emy helped them learn how to know and sell themselves and to connect with others in their fields.

Several other students spoke very specifically to the importance of the Academy curriculum and community to them as minority students. Later in one of the focus group, a female student expressed this keen insight:

*I don't think we've mentioned this, but especially for minorities, this [the Academy] has helped me completely as a minority student. We were shown things that I didn't otherwise know before I came here. And I don't think I would have known if I didn't come to the program.*

A second female student immediately added:

*Especially being a minority in a field that is so complex, to see someone that's doing what you want to do, that's very inspiring. It keeps you motivated to wake up and keep going to class, and keep getting that A on that test.*

The confidence that resulted seems to be inextricably linked to a growing competence, an ability to gain mastery over a set of skills for personal and professional development. In fact, several students described how the Academy seemed to give them a leg up, providing them with a group of like-minded, highly motivated peers. One student said, "I'm not trying to say we're better, but it's like we've got the juice." Students around the table nodded their heads in agreement with this powerful sentiment: we've got the juice—the confidence, the skills, and insights, support, and motivation needed to succeed. This student (and several others) even wondered aloud about their desire—if not responsibility—to try and get others to come and get in on the "juice" of the Academy experience, saying, "I want to see

other people who think they're just mediocre and want to do more... because this is my institution. This is my school. It's like, 'You're already at Tuskegee University, why can't we do better, learn more, get the keys to success?'"

Once again a qualification is perhaps in order: what is noteworthy is that after a pilot experience—one where like most other pilots, the process of mastering the optimal implementation experience is a work in progress—the students perceive that they have gained great confidence and that confidence has resulted in demonstrated competence (in terms of their successes in the classroom and in their pre-professional experiences). Their confidence is so strong that they seem to express guilt that only a select few have experienced this program. Put in a more positive way, they express a heartfelt sense of responsibility for ensuring that more of their peers can experience it. On the range of potential post-pilot feedback that could have surfaced, it is important to take note of what they are not saying, like: It was okay. Maybe this wasn't the best use of our time. Not sure how or where I would use this. These quite common program intervention reflections are noticeably absent; moreover, they are replaced with a passionate set of personal endorsements for the powerful impact of the Academy experience on their confidence and competence and an authentic desire to make sure that others do not miss out on this experience in the future.

**Theme 3: The Academy developed in students resilience, growth mindset, mental and emotional toughness, and aligned ambitions.**

Many of the students spoke about how the Academy experience had helped them to become more resilient, in particular showing them how to handle failure productively using it as an opportunity for growth and improvement. One student explained:

*Being a part of Let Us Academy has taught the importance of learning from your mistakes because you will make mistakes, as a college student and as a person in general, in life. But not letting that mistake or failure just be the end of you. You can make plenty of mistakes but if you learn from your mistakes and keep going, you've won. But you let that one small mistake, or it could be a big mistake, whichever, hold you back when you lose, when you let that failure be the end of you.*

Many students spoke of the connection between stress and failure and the notion that stress often results when failure looms as a negative, unproductive, lost experience that produces an accompanying negative emotion. The students described how they learned to reframe failure as nothing more or less than learning and vital experience for future similar circumstances. This is evident in the reflection of the following female student who, like the previous student, describes her journey to learning to embrace failure:

*So, right before I came to the Let Us Academy, I had my first interview for an internship. Before that time, I didn't have a first internship, I didn't even know what to do, I didn't know anything. So I went in there and I bombed the interview because I didn't have any of these skills. But I never look at it like that. I'm always kind*

*of like, any time, when I went to my mom and said, 'Well, Mom, I learned from it.'*

Through the support and shared experience in the Academy community, the students seem to have established a psychologically safe space to fail. A different student expressed it this way:

*In my case, I had unhealthy habits of handling stress. So, [in the Academy] we learned about managing stress. I kind of ditched my old ways where I would just ignore people and try to handle everything on my own, especially if I was stressed out. For example if I failed a test, you won't hear from me for the rest of the day. I disappear and I think that's kind of unhealthy. Now I actually try to go talk to the teacher and ask what I did wrong. I try to be more constructive on how I handle things.*

A student explained:

*I did bad on a test and guess what? I learned that next time, you don't do this and this and this. All a learning experience, that's all you can do. You can just put your best foot forward and you can just learn from it. That's it. You can't beat yourself up about it. These failures are what make us.*

Another student, who works as a teaching assistant, sees the "fail fast" mindset in others. He said:

*'Fail fast' resonated with me because I feel like learning to deal with failure is really important. I've experienced, as a teacher's assistant for math courses... I experienced a lot of people, that when they don't do well, they just shut down. I talked with a student last week. She didn't know a concept that we've been going over for like a month now, but she never spoke up about it, number one. Number two, whenever she didn't know it, she just shut down. I was trying to communicate that that's not healthy.*

*It causes more stress on them because they don't know how to combat that.*

Another student echoed a similar experience:

*I'm an IT major, so we had our first test this semester. I failed it. I just straight up failed it and I was feeling terrible, my friends were trying to cheer me up. I was like, 'I have to go into this hole now, don't talk to me anymore.' But, with Let Us Academy, they taught us about stress and most of my stress comes from not being able to manage my time because I'm always on the go. Once they told us that 'this stress, it's in everybody, you're not alone with this, just talk to anybody.' That's how most of it helped me. Then after these modules, my second test went much better, smoother. Everything is going a little bit better now ... stress is still there, but it's getting better, managing it.*

Failure, stress and time management challenges—the students have learned that these are simply part of the experience that even successful people struggle with, and unlikely ever master completely the skills to deal with. This realization builds solidarity and creates an aligned ambition—an authentic understanding of what it takes to be successful, an experience that includes the very real struggles and even failure. This was the message they received: *We all experience stress; you're not alone; seek the support and expertise of others in your moments of trial.* Along with that message, they also got some very specific strategies on how to reframe setbacks, manage time, and avoid the pitfalls of distress, which seems to have transformed failure and stress from something traumatic to be avoided into an inevitable part of the growth process.

For these students their failures do not negatively define them as students, they simply

serve to build the student up by increasing their individual and collective capacity, which is a nearly perfect definition of the growth mindset, a powerful asset outlined in the work of Carol Dweck. Rather than seeing their abilities as fixed or stable, and allowing failure to define what they can't do, they describe their failures as leading to additional learning and expanded capacity (i.e., growth). This approach also reveals the wholeheartedness and vulnerability described by Brene Brown as a powerful antidote to the perfectionist weaknesses described by Tal Ben Shahar, which plagues so many young people. Through the Academy students do not suffer in isolation, but rather find a community of “fellow learners” who grow in their ability to find value in their failures through the lessons learned and the resilience gained from their first-hand experiences. A female student expressed the following:

*Just being in the Academy and being surrounded by people who are going through the exact same thing as you. Knowing that, “Okay, you're stressed, I'm stressed.” I was at this small group last week and it was like a Christian small group. So, we looked at this video and we talked about how we all got issues, we just hide them in and we do this all sheltering about how nobody's there for us. We are all brothers and sisters at this school, so we need to all realize that. Especially in Let Us Academy, it's an Academy for us.*

This student realizes that what seems unique and particular to her is in fact something common, shared among all her community. The Academy is not something being done to them; it is something being done for them. Through it they are forming a unified band of brothers and sisters experiencing something in common. They now realize that reaching their

goals won't be a simple, easy, straight line from here to there. In this sense they have a very aligned ambition—a sense of knowing what to expect and not being crushed when the process requires some failures, ups and downs, and more time and/or energy than they might have originally expected.

Students spoke about other tools and strategies that were particularly helpful in helping them navigate the challenges of their transition to college and their evolving sense of what would be required for achieving their goals. One student spoke about the goal achievement and stress and time management modules:

*The “Goal Setting to Goal Achievement” and “Managing Priorities and Stress” were two modules that really got to me because I was a total wreck in the beginning just trying to really adapt to the collegiate level.*

Another student voiced a similar experience:

*I would say “Managing Priorities and Stress” played a very, very, very big role for me and not just in school, but during my internship. I went back to the book [during the internship] to look at that certain module because I was like “Okay, I’m stressed out. I’m alone. I have nobody to talk to because I know nobody here in St. Louis.” So, when I went back to that module, it was just like, okay, just prioritize it, things that you want to get done, set goals that you want to do. So, going back to that book, it made me realize that I’m not alone because I have so much stuff to do and I can meet so many new people. I just have to write the things down and actually get it done.*

The contents of the module become useful and relevant when the circumstances push the students out of their comfort and competence zone. Initially they panic and struggle, but then

they return to the strategies, which reestablish an internal locus of control over their situation. Once they make their way through some tough spots, they emerge with new growth and new confidence.

**Theme 4: The optimal Academy experience connected the important to the urgent, balancing strategies and stories, and putting strategies into action when appropriate.**

The Academy experience has evolved into an approach that builds the optimal mix of strategies and stories, which are combined to open up the learning for students using the 4 KEYS of Self-Study, Other-Study, Simulation/Practice, and Support/Challenge. The strategies are drawn from the research-based *Excellence with Integrity Employability Essentials* curriculum with its replicable real-world strategies (i.e., tools). The stories are drawn from diverse mentors who offer their real-world experiences and wisdom about what to do better or differently and what to limit or avoid altogether. The stories also come from the instructors and advisors, as well as through the speakers. Successful alums, and others from similar backgrounds as the students, provide motivation and reinforce aligned ambitions (an authentic sense of “here is what it takes to make it.”). Across the two years of pilot implementation there was some variation in utilization of speakers. Whereas in year one the weight of the intervention was on the books and modules found in the curriculum, with supplemental speakers, year two placed greater emphasis on the Academy Life Series speakers (the stories) and then utilized the books and modules as supplemental support. One student said,

*The book itself isn't a bad thing, it's the book being introduced first that caused [my] negative impression. Because it's all these assignments, it's all these modules. It's great to be introduced to the program [with the speakers first] versus the book first.*

This student is exploring the optimal combination of strategy and story that forms the Academy experience. In particular the student is reacting to the changes made in the intervention plan from year one to year two, where the year one pilot began by intensively focusing on the modules from the books, with some supplemental speakers in the class—for just the class members. In year two of the pilot adjustments were made to focus more initially on the Life Speaker series (which was also opened up to the entire campus), and then in the second semester, more work focused on the modules.

The students shared many insights around the optimal balance of strategies and stories, including instances where the balance missed the mark. For example, one student said:

*Last week we talked about priorities and managing stress. I don't deal with stress well. I do a lot of stuff, so I get stressed out easily and I'm learning how to deal with it better. Then with the failure thing, we had a speaker come and the first thing she said was, Fail fast, because it's going to happen. So, you're going to have to get ready for it and know how to come back from it. That's what I'm taking right now and working with that. Dealing with the failure and the stress. Managing my time and prioritizing, and all of that.*

This is an example where the strategies and the stories meet the perfect recipient readiness, as this student realizes that she needs this, and she needs it now. When the urgent (I

have stress; I failed a test) and the important (here's some knowledge about stress management and about growth mindset and skills) intersect, this is where high value is intuited by the students. One student provided insight into the valuation process engaged in by many students:

*One of those meetings that I came to spoke to me. I'm that type, if it's not going to make me waste my time, then I'll come. But, if I feel like I waste my time, then I'm not coming. So, at first, it was just that's how I was thinking. I'm being honest with you all, that's how I was thinking. I don't want to read out this book, I don't want to do extra work, I'm done with my homework for the night. But, then I started thinking, "Let me go to this meeting."*

Another student offered a similar sentiment:

*It really depends on how you take the speaker. How they speak to you. If they really don't speak to you or you don't take it in the way everyone else does, it gets kind of repetitive. It gets kind of boring and then people stop going.*

What helps keep the students engaged is, not surprisingly, a combination of the message, the messenger and the recipient. Students are trying to assess, *What's in it for me? Does it relate to me and to my strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats? Is it nice, necessary, neither, or both?* The Academy is experiential learning that is like a class. But, if it is too much like a class then there is pushback. Reading the book and doing the activities can get repetitive. But students believe the book and its Tools have value. One student said:

*I would say the book definitely did help. I still have my book, I still look at it from time to time and it definitely did make an impact on me.*

The replicable strategies of the book were also described as being used by students in situations beyond and after the introduction in class. One student described:

*Over the summer I had an internship. Before the internship I remember in Let Us Academy we were talking about how to collaborate with other people. During the internship, it wasn't the easiest experience. It was my first time collaborating with a lot of people who had a lot of different, stronger opinions than me. And I remember trying to take control of the situation and being like okay, "Listen, guys, listen to me, please listen to what I have to say!" But, then I thought back to our lessons, I'm like, this is not the best way. Everybody in [the internship group] was like, "No, I want it, listen to me!" Everybody was so upset. I remember everybody getting together and me saying, "Hey guys, how about we all write down what we each want then from there we pick out the best from all them." And that's what we did. And it worked, it worked for me in that situation. I remember being like, "I don't know how I would have got through this if I didn't have that Let Us lesson" because other than that, we all would have been scrambling around and we might not have gotten everything that I need to get for the internship done, and that was important to me. I definitely leaned back on [the modules] during that instance.*

For this student the module on communication and collaboration and the related EWI Tools (including the Win-Win Negotiation Strategy) didn't really come into focus and add value until she was placed in her internship and was desperate for a solution. The important content from the book met the urgent situation and she was able to put her learning into action with the habit she had acquired. But, at first, the book and the EWI Tools don't always jump out as relevant.

One professor described how she connected the content of the modules with the very real experiences unfolding in the classroom.

*For the motivational part, and study habits, you have to pick your moments. Actually it was after they had a quiz and they didn't do too well. So it was perfect timing. So I went into it realistically. What did you do to prepare? What was your motivation? Did you just say, "Oh, I have a quiz" and just look at it for an hour the night before? [This approach helps] to make it more applicable. That one kind of hit home and so they realized, "Okay, I'm in not in high school where I can cram and make great grades. But college, this is something new. I may have all of the motivation but really I have to back it up. It's not just wanting to do it."*

This professor took the habits for excellence, which is a topic that all would acknowledge as being important generally speaking, and she made it relevant for students by connecting it to an urgent situation that had unfolded in her class: a bad set of quiz results. She picked her moment to show them that these important skills they had discussed in the orientation were in fact urgently important for success right now. She showed them that their previous approaches and their willpower would fall short of helping them reach their goals and that they must master new tools and strategies, which were there for them in the modules. This same professor used another strategy to find the right timing. She described:

*I have two roles in the department. I'm an instructor there and an academic advisor. So I could kind of go in and say, "Today I'm your academic advisor. So we are taking a break from [the content]." As an academic advisor it's hard to get to try to get them to come to the office. They only come there when it's some dire situation. So this way, I could actually have*

*some real academic advising time with them. I [also] have three hours of lecture and I have a two-hour lab. Sometimes if I couldn't get to a [module topic] I might take an hour from the lab time to do something and go into my academic advisor mode and talk about, "What are your employability skills? You know you have to prepare for a career."*

This professor found several ways to choose her moments to maximize students' receptivity. In part the professor explicitly coded for students the role from which she was approaching the content: "Today I'm talking to you as your academic advisor." She connected her advising to an acute and pressing need: the students have struggled with their quizzes. She even found a time when the focus on these essential skills was a welcomed respite from the five-hour block of lecture and lab that comprised the formal class.

*When the student is ready the teacher appears.* This familiar aphorism represents the simplest distillation of the secret to the success of the Academy experience. When the students are exposed to knowledge, strategies, and stories that match to their challenges and opportunities, then they perceive the experience as powerful and transformational. If the information is nice but seems not necessary—for their current reality—then the cost-benefit analysis starts to tip more towards the "I don't have time for this." When students see the instrumental value of the Academy tools and strategies, they get hooked. And we see that the most effective program faculty are helping to prime the students' readiness by strategically moving the modules of the highest student need and urgency into the queue and constantly helping the students to see what is in it for them to-

day, currently, not simply at some point in their future. Employability essentials may seem like something for the future. For these students, their mentors in the Academy were able to make the employability essentials essential for success as students today, which will in turn prepare them for the future.

#### Theme 5: Discerning how to inspire and/or require the Academy in efforts to scale it.

The students and mentors from the Academy that took part in the case study focus groups and interviews are passionate advocates for the power of the experience. They speak with authenticity regarding their perceptions of the program's impact. Given this, it is not surprising that they expressed their personal interest in scaling the program so that more students at Tuskegee would be impacted (something that is also under consideration by the program leaders on campus). The students spontaneously reflected on their own sense regarding the promise and potential pitfalls of scaling, including whether the program is a good fit for everyone, or for a more targeted cohort. One student said:

*I think that's where I would want to see us try to reach out to [other] students that would really benefit, because everyone can benefit from this program. So it's weird to say like, "Why isn't everybody in this?" because everybody can benefit. So I think my biggest thing would be reaching out to those students who don't feel like they need it for some reason or who don't know about it. It's reaching out to them and making them see why it's important.*

Another student said:

*I feel like Let Us Academy is for everyone. But I feel like not everyone is going to take the op-*

*portunity. Who doesn't want these keys to lead you to a successful life? I would just say, in general, the people who want to be successful and who want to be the leaders, they're going to come. But the people who don't, won't.... I definitely felt like [in the Academy] there were a lot of goal-oriented, like-minded individuals who wanted the same thing I wanted. [However,] you want other people [to participate]. I know I want to be successful but what about the other people?*

Several students described similar sentiments that the Academy seems to draw out and work very well for those who are goal-oriented and already self-motivated. Thus, the program seems to deeply engage the deeply-engaged, but there was less evidence of its ability to engage the currently disengaged—or partially engaged. It seems that the program—as currently designed and implemented—has less of a draw for those who are not already self-driven to be leaders, self-motivated to achieve high GPA's, or on a personal quest to maximize their university experience.

For those who are motivated, interested, and driven it seems to bond into a cohesive and empowered group. This was the context discussed in an earlier theme related to students' growing confidence where the students were trying to say they felt they had an advantage or leg up, without appearing to look down on others. The one student said, "I'm not trying to say we're better, but it's like we've got the juice.... I want to see other people who think they're just mediocre and want to do more... because this is my institution. This is my school. It's like, 'You're already at Tuskegee University, why can't we do better, learn more, get the keys to success?'" The students realize that in their Academy group they have a shared vision

and an enhanced set of skills; and they recognize this vision and these skills as being absent or diminished in those not in the group. One student described:

*All of my friends group, we all did the Let Us Academy together, luckily. But I remember the students outside of it [not in the Academy], we would go to classes and we'd be like, "Hey, they weren't here for that meeting last week and it shows. It definitely shows." But it's not like we don't want everybody to get it but for some reason some people don't know, some people feel like they can't, and then some people just genuinely don't want to. I don't feel like you're ever gonna get 100% on board with everybody, as much as you plan to and you want to.*

The students and teachers connected to the Academy are wrestling to understand the fickle commitment of students to their own self-assessment and development journey. We would hope that all would be self-motivated, and yet we acknowledge the many very real distractions and barriers. Requiring participation has the advantage that some might be inspired by motions-learning. Having participated in learning essential skills in a strong community of peers has the potential to be a catalyst for some. However, the very act of requiring participation can also breed resentment and closed-mindedness. The first take-away is that the current Academy participants feel strongly that there is something important happening, the development of vital assets, and they want all to experience it. This is a good and powerful starting point. As to how to scale the impact of the Academy for all, or at least more Tuskegee students, that remains an unresolved question that will likely require ongoing deliberation.



## CONCLUSION

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This exploratory case study sought to investigate whether there was compelling evidence of impact from the pilot, as well as identify important insights into optimal conditions for implementation of the *Excellence with Integrity Employability Essentials*. At the close of this study the authors are convinced that indeed there is evidence of impact and insights about optimal implementation conditions. In fact, having observed the curriculum in numerous settings and circumstances, the authors were persuaded that the LET US Academy has strong potential for preparing Tuskegee students (and other students in similar settings) to form a powerful community, authentically boost students' confidence, and demonstrably improve the skills needed for college and career success. The exploratory case study methodology is not designed to prove something works. It is designed to discern whether, and in what ways, there is something interesting and promising happening. We believe that this exploratory case study has yielded insights that can help to refine both the intervention design and the outcome evaluation needed to more definitively establish the nature and intensity of the program's impact.

Moving forward there are several important considerations regarding scaling the good of the Academy and fully understanding and capturing its impact. These include:

1. Determining the optimal implementation structure and intensity. The sense of confidence created when connected to the community of support likely pulls for a different experience than a traditional classroom.
2. Finding ways for ongoing formative evaluation that is focused on more intensive observation of the implementation experi-

ence so as to document the different implementation approaches and the perceived impact.

3. Conducting a more formal program outcomes evaluation to more definitely verify impact on a larger sample of students over a longer period of time.
4. Continuing to find ways to expand the Academy experience at Tuskegee, at other Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and in other settings where rigorous education and real-world preparation are prioritized.

A familiar educational adage states: *when the student is ready the teacher appears*. For these Academy students, these teachers and mentors, this curriculum of essential knowledge and these tools and strategies have made a deep impact in no small part because of their readiness and interest. Booker T. Washington, a Tuskegee founder and perhaps the most famous person connected to Tuskegee University, famously said, *Character is power*. Combine the wisdom of these two quotes together, and we have a plausible explanation for the likely impact of the Academy experience. The readiness and interest of the students, the passion and commitment of their mentors, and the focus on replicable, research-based character strategies has resulted in a perceived power source—"the juice" as the students called it. Many years after their founder's time at Tuskegee, the truth of Booker T. Washington's assertion is reaffirmed. Character is indeed power and the LET US Academy at Tuskegee, with its focus on the development of performance character and moral character, is providing students the essential skills and the enduring power of character needed for success at Tuskegee and beyond.

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<https://www.tuskegee.edu/programs-courses/colleges-schools/caens/daes/undergraduate-research-and-mentoring/let-us-for-stem>

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